



Review of

**Jonathan Harris, editor,
Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art
(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 272 pp.**

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Identity Theft presents a striking package, starting with its controversial cover design. The colour combination of black, green, red and white in Bashil Makhoul's *Al-hejara* (1990) mimics the Palestinian flag, the display of which was illegal under the terms of the Israeli occupation, in order to question "the sinister rhetoric of nationalism through its use of symbols of blood and land" (50). In another work, *Zigzag* (1992), Makhoul appropriates the logo of Shell oil into an arabesque geometric pattern which also repeats the form of a six-pointed star in reference to the Judaic Star of David: for Makhoul, "Economics, religion and politics cannot be separated and

our identities are formed within this mesh” (40). These issues of identity formation, appropriation and reformation, and their entanglement within art across cultures, are at the crux of the papers in *Identity Theft*. Gordon Hon’s interview with Makhoul is the second chapter of the book, following editor Jonathan Harris’ introduction which sets forth the scope of the book, derived from a “Critical Forum” conference held in the Spring of 2006 between Tate Liverpool and the University of Liverpool. Harris’ chapter goes on to treat the history of the formation of Tate Liverpool, first called ‘Tate in the North’ or ‘Tate of the North’, as arguably a form of ‘cultural colonisation’ and so locates the Tate’s project, then as now, as with all state-sponsored arts, socio-politically.

Lewis Johnson’s paper, in chapter three, considers the negotiation of identity in the work of contemporary artists in Turkey. Widely held as a “bridge between east and west,” this stereotype of Turkey, especially Istanbul, is disrupted, negotiated and played with by such artists as Hüseyin Alptekin, Hale Tenger and Z. Seren Göktan, who engage with such issues as colonialism, orientalism, nation-building, secularism and religious tension. While critics have tended to pigeonhole contemporary Turkish artists as “narrow and locally-minded, and not as truly international as their contemporaries in New York, London, Berlin or Beijing,”¹ Johnson’s argument is that the situation is more complex, with artists responding to globalisation in localised ways which in the work of Z. Seren Göktan direct the gaze through globally situated new media.

Contemporary African artists have had to renegotiate similar impositions of what is ‘Africa’, all-too-often based on the Western category of ethnographic art reified by both anthropologists and art historians until relatively recently. In the ongoing (re)forming of their identities, contemporary African artists are situated locally, globally and in Bhabha’s ‘third space’,² and as Will Rea sets out in his chapter, such artists as Samuel Olorunwaju and El Anatsui negotiate these identities in ways which disrupt Western (neo)colonial perceptions. El Anatsui, for instance, is part of Nigeria’s ‘Natural Synthesis’ movement (253), which “combines

¹ Necmi Sönmez, ‘Istanbul: Look Beyond the Hype’, *The Art Newspaper* 216 (September 2010): 28.

² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

formal instruction with the promotion of the tradition that each artist inherits from their background” (p153). His most recent work includes monumental sculptures such as *Earth Cloth* (2003), drawing on Ghanaian *adinkra* and *kente* cloth traditions but made from brightly coloured liquor bottle tops woven together with copper wire. “[M]etal takes on the properties of fabric falling into folds and drapery” in a technology of enchantment³ which challenges the presumed disconnection between ethnographic and contemporary art, in an assertion of “sustained multiple identities of the post-colonial condition” (155).

In chapter eight, Karen Jacobs applies Nicholas Thomas’ idea of ‘bilateral practice’⁴ wherein both the indigenous Kamoro and the multinational Freeport Mining Company use appropriation as a tool to negotiate the boundaries between indigenous and global concerns in New Guinea. Freeport commissions, collects and displays Kamoro art, deemed to be apolitical and separate from the wider culture, implicitly to promote a positive image, “deflecting criticisms of social and environmental issues” (190). Simultaneously, Kamoro artists have absorbed outside influences on their work and re-appropriated them – again without explicit political intent – and in so doing have drawn attention to their wider culture and the capitalist interests of Freeport. Both interest groups use art covertly as a political agent of appropriation, but the terms of engagement are, of course, unequal.

The final three chapters of the book turn their attention to the issue of art and identity on the global stage of the twenty-first century. *Head-On* (2006) by Cai Guo-Qiang consists of a glass wall against which life-size replicas of wolves leap in a dense and attenuated pack, and rebound in awkward, painful head-on collisions. The work is universal, signalling a human fact of life – what seems resplendent from afar is often painfully false. However, Nicholas Mirzoeff further contextualises the installation of the work at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2006 in relation to such redolent local themes as the Berlin Wall, Holocaust and the general strike in

³ Here, Rea draws on Alfred Gell’s work, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40–66.

⁴ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 5.

East Germany of 17 June 1954, in order to comment on the (principally Left's) 'politics of identification' (197) in a globalised world – “located between the abstract and the indexical, doing complicated and condensed work, a dreaming that is not specific but general in that it belongs to all of us who have the chance to see it. It is truly striking” (217). In contrast to Mirzoeff's activist-style essay, Angela Dimitrikaki points to the apparently widespread belief among artists that they “cannot change anything” (223). Reflecting on the former power of 'identity politics' as “a *realizable* redistribution of power,” and now “the powerlessness of art” (240), she notes the preoccupation with capitalist relations – “Capitalism as globalisation is the contemporary sublime” – in both of these paradigms, but concludes ambivalently, perhaps even pessimistically, that “what this actually means today is far from clear” (241).

Closing the volume in a more upbeat tone, Laura Sillars considers artists' responses to the institutionalisation and corporate re-appropriation of signs of identity, using new media to “invoke new meanings and provoke audiences to re-imagine themselves constituted through vast systems and conceptually complex social networks” (269). The papers in *Identity Theft* (including those I've not had the space to discuss) treat the complexity of the tension between local and global discourses of identity; between those artists whose work speaks of local concerns, or even 'ethnographic' context, and those who speak to a 'truly international' art world. By turns, identifying themselves as artists on a global stage risks buying into the post-modern notion of the global artist, international dealer-critic system, and what Kwon⁵ describes as floating in an alienating global soup – a sense of belonging may not be such a bad thing after all. In any case, identity, locally positioned and globally framed, remains crucial in the production and consumption of art today, and this book is successful in examining the fluid, contested and political nature of identity across cultures.

⁵ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).